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ABSTRACT

Due to heavy teaching loads, high adjunct faculty numbers, and scheduling and commuting factors, community college faculty infrequently have the opportunity to share in a collegial forum. In an attempt to provide an opportunity for faculty to share innovative instructional strategies and discuss their work, Hudson Valley Community College (HVCC), in Troy, New York, established the SHOWCASE project. SHOWCASE began with highly publicized surveys distributed to faculty and staff designed to elicit possible forum topics and suggested presenters. Once the survey results were reviewed, five workshops were developed, publicized via SHOWCASE letterhead notice posted on campus, and conducted. Each workshop included a 1-hour presentation by the members involved, a packet of related readings and handouts, a workshop evaluation, and a flyer advertising the next SHOWCASE workshop. Each session was videotaped and stored for future reference in HVCC's Center for Effective Teaching. SHOWCASE forums included interactive video presentations on "The Context Driven Classroom," "Hooke, Newton, and Bungee: Using Interactive Video to Teach Physics," and "Women and Minority Issues: An Interactive Inquiry of Attitudes"; traditional presentations on "Quality in the Classroom," "Teaching Students with Learning Disabilities," and "Developing Guidelines for Students' Written Work"; and a roundtable discussion on "Dealing with Prejudice in the Classroom." HVCC's faculty has responded favorably to the SHOWCASE program, which has increased faculty collegiality. (MAB)

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INSTRUCTORS AS INVESTORS:

A COLLEGIAL CONSPIRACY

TO IMPROVE CLASSROOM INSTRUCTION

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Dr. Joan Lawson is an associate professor and Chairperson of the Early Childhood Department at Hudson Valley Community College in Troy, New York. She teaches 15 credits in Early Childhood Education at the College and coordinates the development of the proposed Early Childhood Education Center and the World's Children Center, scheduled to open on the Hudson Valley campus in the Fall of 1995. Dr. Lawson chairs the Sabbatical Leave Committee, and serves on the steering committee for the Center for Effective Teaching and the Advisory Board of the Individual Studies Program at Hudson Valley Community College. She is also a member of the steering committee of the State University of New York at Albany School of Education Alumni Association and serves on the Advisory Council for the State University of New York Consortium on Disabilities Studies. Dr. Lawson serves as an Executive Committee member of the Board of Directors of the State University at Albany Child Care Center and as an Advisory Board member of the Viking Child Care Center at Hudson Valley Community College.

Dr. Lawson received a B.A. degree in Speech Pathology and Audiology from the State University College at Plattsburgh, New York, and an M.S. degree and an Ed.D. degree in Reading from the State University of New York at Albany. She has participated in post doctoral study in critical thinking and education at Harvard University. Dr. Lawson serves as a consultant to many area school districts and frequently presents workshops at local and state conferences. She is married and the mother of two daughters, ages three and five.

Hudson Valley Community College shares with many other community colleges the varieties of strengths and frailties that bless or beset all such institutional life as this century ends. Its mixture of young and older teachers and students come to classes each day with the worries and fascinations that travel with all. They bring to this setting their problems and their energies, as old as the human soul. For some "it is the worst of times" and for others "it is the best of times."

With this as context, I have the great fortune, as do many community college faculty, of teaching at an institution that considers the quality of the classroom experience a high priority. The luxury of having the opportunity to teach well is one of the reasons I come to work each day. In addition, I am also fortunate to chair a program which has as its mission teacher education. The Early Childhood Department, which I chair, teaches teachers of young children-children who are truly students at their most critical period for learning and development. Teaching is, therefore, my passion and my profession, and in my more desperate moments, I am heard to rationalize this passion (and the long hours) of my work with the phrase (usually aimed at my husband) "I'm not making perfume all day over there, you know!"

Teaching is infinitely important work. We know that. Supporting teachers, and aligning support for them, is paramount to the success of this work and the quality of the learning experience that occurs in our classrooms. This is part of what we

as administrators work so hard to do each day, in and among the myriad of paperwork and meeting schedules that we juggle. We strive to support our faculty and their efforts at teaching well, so that effective, exciting learning happens.

A recent outcome of our assessment efforts on campus was some discussion of outcomes assessment relative to innovative instruction. The opportunity to explore new ways to teach a given segment of material or a different group of students has always been for me, at least, the "good stuff" about evaluation and assessment. Reviewing and revising course outlines and agendas is the exciting part, and trying out new ways to present content information in context is what keeps my teaching fires alive. Occasionally the innovative instruction component of outcomes assessment is overlooked by some who view outcomes assessment as a threatening movement to evaluate teacher effectiveness. In an effort to allay such fears, a way to focus instead on the effective and innovative instruction by faculty on our campus was needed.

In addition, all too often on the community college campus, with heavy teaching loads, high adjunct faculty numbers and varied scheduling and commuting factors, the opportunity for faculty to share in a collegial forum is infrequent. As a result, faculty may barely become acquainted with their department chair, maybe the Dean, and some fellow department faculty, or at least the ones with whom they share an office!

Therefore, what seemed optimal was a forum within which faculty and staff could not only share innovative instructional strategies, but have an opportunity to talk with one another about their work. Here, talk would be seen and accepted as communication among equals, where a common and egalitarian effort to contribute was uninterrupted by status or responsibility. Hopefully, a climate would develop where the imagination would not be hindered by fear of disapproval and an atmosphere of free inquiry and exchange could grow.

From these needs, SHOWCASE was born. Specifically, the project began with highly publicized surveys to faculty and staff (via all-college meetings and faculty-staff newsletters) requesting topics of interest and suggested presenters--from our campus and otherwise. Once these survey results were reviewed, a series of workshops was developed: a kickoff workshop the first week of the academic year with a guest speaker followed by a dinner, then four subsequent late-afternoon workshops presented by faculty and followed by hors d'oeuvres, throughout the rest of the year. Each workshop was well publicized via SHOWCASE letterhead notices posted all over campus and before and after articles in the faculty-staff newsletter. Each workshop included a one hour presentation by the faculty member(s) involved, frequently interactive in nature, a packet of related readings and handouts, a workshop evaluation, and a flyer advertising the next SHOWCASE workshop. Each session was videotaped for future reference in our campus Center for Effective Teaching.

Over the course of the academic year, interest grew and numbers of attendees at the SHOWCASE workshops increased. Rather than having to search for presenters, faculty members began to approach the SHOWCASE committee (of two!) requesting participation and the opportunity to present at future sessions. SHOWCASE topics included three using interactive video technology, entitled "The Context Driven Classroom" and "Hooke, Newton and Bungee: Using Interactive Video to Teach Physics", and "Women and Minorities Issues: An Interactive Inquiry of Attitudes". Other SHOWCASE sessions addressed diverse topics such as "Quality in the Classroom", "Teaching Students with Learning Disabilities", "Developing Guidelines for Students' Written Work" and a roundtable discussion on "Dealing with Prejudice in the Classroom".

Imagine a room filled with computers, college faculty and staff, each responding simultaneously via IBM's computer based Classroom Presentation Option (CPO) student response system to questions about attitudes on campus relating to women and minorities: "Should homosexuals be prevented from holding certain jobs? Should we simply teach the basics and stop worrying about diversity? Does social class membership determine career acheivement?" As participants punch in their responses on individual keypads they are processed by the computer and instantaneous tabulations are displayed on a screen in the front of the room. While maintaining confidentiality, the tabulated responses sent a strong message to those participating about the attitudes of many regarding these topics.

Another scene is of a carefully arranged circle of chairs in a faculty conference room, slowly but surely filling with over seventy faculty, staff and administrators who have come together to discuss the topic of dealing with prejudice in our classrooms. The faculty member who coordinated this SHOWCASE posed some initial questions: "If prejudice by definition is an irrational, inflexible attitude, how do we address it in an arena which prizes and emphasizes both rationality and flexibility of thought? Is there, after all, such a thing as an unprejudiced person? Do we have evidence that prejudice exists on our campus?" Responses were quiet but straightforward, and the atmosphere was of serious introspection and concern. Participants shared experiences and strategies, questions were posed, some answered, some tabled for future reflection. The session continued well past the designated closing time, and at its close, many were heard to say "We need to do more of this."

With this kind of exchange there came for some an onset and for others a revival of seeing the teaching task as one of translation, of taking course content and adapting it to student experience and interest. It was the old teaching legacy of saying one thing in terms of another--of becoming daily metaphor-makers, with the chance that some will hit the target and others miss it. The effort doesn't insure effectiveness nor equality of outcome. Yet through it all, the integrity of the content remains intact. This is no small achievement and clearly one that warrants praise.

The SHOWCASE sessions have been attended by increasing numbers of faculty and staff and a newly developed subcommittee of our Center for Effective Teaching has assumed responsibility for coordinating future SHOWCASE workshops. As the vision for SHOWCASE became a reality, more and more faculty and staff also began to TALK with each other, about students and teaching, of course, but also about universal topics such as appropriate expectations of the community college student and curriculum and socio-political factors influencing our students and our programs. Faculty began to recognize colleagues perhaps unknown previously, and more and more constructive conversations about pedagogy and profession began to occur: in the hallways, on the quads, in the faculty dining room, and in faculty offices between classes. An increased sense of the instructor as investor in the product as well as the process of the community college experience began to emerge and faculty have taken the time to acknowledge that SHOWCASE has indeed played a part in this.

It would be reckless to claim any grandiose transformation taking place as an outcome of these SHOWCASE meetings. Never-the-less, there was a beginning. In my view, a milieu was born--or reborn, that may have encouraged participants to hold their profession in a higher regard. This milieu has as an energizing component the personal reward that comes to anyone who embraces change as challenge and who holds higher aims as worthy of pursuit and satisfying to the spirit.